DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 569 CS 510 537

AUTHOR Henning, Teresa B.
TITLE Theoretical Models of Tutor Talk: How Practical Are They?
PUB DATE 2001-03-15
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (52nd, Denver, CO, March 14-17, 2001).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperative Learning; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Tutoring; *Tutors; *Writing Laboratories
IDENTIFIERS Collaborative Talk; Empirical Research; *Tutor Role; *Tutor Training

ABSTRACT

Writing center theory in general seems to favor a collaborative model of the tutorial where the tutor and tutee work together to create shared knowledge and a shared text and an expressionist model of the tutorial which requires that the tutor do less talking and more listening. Writing center empirical research, however, suggests that the key factors that contribute to a tutorial being perceived as successful include: how well the tutor and writer negotiate an agenda that meets the writer's expectations, whether or not the writer is able to get and apply the information he or she needs to write or revise his or her work, and how well the tutor establishes rapport with the writer. What is surprising is that empirical research also suggests that common assumptions regarding the amount and kind of talk related to collaborative and expressionist models of the tutorial are not always a reliable means for reaching these characteristics in a tutorial. Based on this empirical evidence, this paper argues that, when training tutors writing center directors should not limit their training to collaborative and expressionist models of the tutorial. The paper makes this argument by demonstrating how a variety of tutoring strategies and models are often required to attain each characteristic. It also demonstrates that a failure to be flexible about these models in a tutorial session can contribute to a session's failure. Finally, the paper discusses the implications this research has for tutor training. (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 451 569

Theoretical Models of Tutor Talk: How Practical Are They?

by Teresa B. Henning

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
T. B. Henning
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CS 510 537

Dr. Teresa B. Henning

CCCC

Denver, CO

15 March 2001

Theoretical Models of Tutor Talk: How Practical Are They?

Talk is perhaps the single most important tool that tutors use, and it is also the tool that tutors receive the most advice about. Current tutor training texts such as Gillespie and Lerner's *Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* suggest that tutors should do no more than 50% of the talking (103). Gillespie and Lerner's advice on this issue represents nicely a common tutoring assumption that tutors who talk too much, and, more specifically, tutors who rely on directive talk, are not employing tutoring methods effectively. In fact, writing center theory in general seems to favor a collaborative model of the tutorial where the tutor and tutee work together to create shared knowledge and a shared text and an expressionist model of the tutorial which requires that the tutor do less talking and more listening.

However, writing center empirical research runs counter to these assumptions. This research finds that the amount of talk and the style of talk used does not directly impact whether or not a tutorial is perceived as successful by a writer and tutor. Rather, this research suggests that the key factors that contribute to a tutorial being perceived as successful include: how well the tutor and writer negotiate an agenda that meets the writer's expectations, whether or not the writer is able to get and apply the information he or she needs to write or revise his or her work, and how well the tutor establishes rapport with the writer. This list of characteristics should not be surprising; as this list echoes

Muriel Harris's arguments in her *College English* article "Why Writers Need Writing Tutors." However, what is surprising is that empirical research also suggests that common assumptions regarding the amount and kind of talk related to collaborative and expressionist models of the tutorial are not always a reliable means for reaching these characteristics in a tutorial. In fact, either of these models, in certain contexts, may interfere with one or more of these characteristics.

Based on this empirical evidence, my paper will argue that when training tutors writing center directors should not limit their training to collaborative and expressionist models of the tutorial. Rather, new tutors should be trained to understand the characteristics that make a tutorial successful and be offered a variety of strategies that they can apply with flexibility to achieve these characteristics. This paper will make this argument by demonstrating how a variety of tutoring strategies and models are often required to attain each characteristic. It will also demonstrate that a failure to be flexible about these models in a tutorial session can contribute to a session's failure. Finally, this paper will discuss the implications this research has for tutor training.

One feature that contributes to the perceived success of a session is how well the writer and tutor negotiate an agenda. Carolyn Walker and David Elias note that when negotiating an agenda if tutors can elicit criteria from the writer, encourage writer evaluation (275), build on this evaluation (276), and rely on the writer's expertise (278), the tutorial is more likely to be perceived as successful. In addition, Terese Thonous points out, that agenda setting is likely to lead to success if the tutor's and writer's diagnoses correspond with each other. That may be why Walker and Elias insist that tutors begin by eliciting criteria from the writer. However, doing successful agenda

setting doesn't mean that the tutor talks less. In fact, they offer at least one case where a tutor, Tutor C, did the most talking; even talking for five minutes straight at one point (277). Yet, they note the session was well rated because "the tutor allowed the student to have her say, but also reflected her evaluation back to her" (277). That means that the tutor and writer also came to the same diagnoses about the writer's work, which supports Thonous's point that successful agenda setting requires agreement. Overall, the fact that this session was perceived as successful is really not surprising because as Harris notes, when a tutor helps a writer to set criteria for his or her assessment, "the writer gains confidence" (35). So, even though the tutor talked more in clear violation of the assumption that tutors should talk less, because the writer's agenda and expectations for evaluation were not violated, the writer came away with a sense of confidence and success.

But, Elias and Walker are quick to note that a tutor dominating the conversation can be problematic if that talk does not help the writer generate her own criteria and build off her expertise. They offer a telling example of one faculty tutor who actually takes over the writing of the paper which in turn leaves the writer feeling lost and at a loss for how to re-write. Here's a brief excerpt from that session:

> T: Write this: 'The unity of effect in this story insists, or is made, is created….'
>
> S: Wait, wait. 'The unity of effect is shown in all scenes by representing a symbol.'
>
> T: Good.
>
> S: Oh, God, now I'm lost.

Essentially, then, one factor in creating a successful tutorial is how well the talk surrounding evaluation and agenda setting empowers the writer to develop his/her own criteria thereby allowing the writer to come to a better understanding of what good writing entails. If the tutor employs talk in a manner that achieves this end, neither the amount of talk nor the style of talk is significant.

Another characteristic of a successful tutorial that is related to the writer's empowerment involves how well the tutor helps the writer gain an understanding of some aspect of writing and helps the writer apply that knowledge. Training methods that favor either a collaborative or expressionist model of the tutorial often suggest that tutors help writers gain this understanding for themselves by posing non-directive and thoughtful questions. However, two empirical studies suggest that a non-directive approach does not always work well to empower writers with the understanding they need. Blau, Hall, and Strauss argue that for a tutorial to be perceived as successful by both the writer and the tutor, the tutor needs to be prepared to use both directive and non-directive tutoring methods to help writers acquire the knowledge they need.

To demonstrate this claim, Blau, Hall and Strauss use a transcript of a session between a female graduate tutor and a native-English-speaking male writer. The authors note that the tutor begins the session in a "collaborative fashion" by using open-ended questions (25). However, the reliance on questions becomes strained when it becomes clear that the writer didn't understand what his source material meant by the board of education and did not realize that Cambridge is a city and not a suburb. Rather than simply explaining to the writer that a board of education is a local organization or clarifying that Cambridge is a city, which Blau, Hall and Strauss advise (27), the tutor

attempts to elicit the information from the writer in a non-directive manner. The end result is that the tutor and student waste a lot of time, both get frustrated, the writer does not get his larger concerns addressed, and the writer leaves without the necessary information. As a result, the session isn't perceived as successful.

Blau, Hall and Strauss argue that we need to train tutors to be flexible in their use of both directive and non-directive tutoring styles, so tutors learn to use the most appropriate style given the specific tutoring context. However, a study by Ross MacDonald questions whether non-directive tutoring works at all when he reveals that the assumption that tutors ask good questions to lead students to knowledge in a tutorial is not supported by his empirical data (3). By studying tutor-writer interactions, MacDonald found that successful tutors typically rely on two verbal patterns when tutoring. The first pattern MacDonald labels as an initial pattern. It involves sequences where the tutor or writer initiate some conversation requiring a response or an evaluation. MacDonald found that 65.8% of the time the tutor does this initiating (6) which really is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is the use of a second pattern of verbal interaction MacDonald isolates and labels as an informational pattern. In this pattern, either the tutor or writer "provide some information to the other without having been asked for it" (8). MacDonald found that tutors initiated this pattern more often than writers.

While the use of an informational pattern of discourse suggests that tutors are more directive in sessions than we would normally expect, it is important to note, as MacDonald does, that this pattern of conversation is successful because it is also highly interactive. First, MacDonald notes that the tutor offers information only after initial

questions and interactions with the writer don't yield the necessary information. And, MacDonald points out, that the writer's active listening is an important form of interaction. In addition, when information was provided by the tutor, more participation was then required of the writer when he or she was indirectly or directly prompted to summarize or apply the information. MacDonald offers this example (from which I have removed MacDonald's technical coding marks):

> Tutor: It's gonna be elastic. If it's very steep....
>
> Writer: inelastic.
>
> Tutor: Um hum.
>
> Writer: Not very much change. The quantity doesn't change very much.
>
> Tutor: OK. That's like that's getting back to what you were saying here (pause) and then....
>
> Writer: Um hum.....
>
> Tutor: and then that's responsible responsive to prices and...
>
> Writer: Right. There's a big difference.
>
> Tutor: Right. Ok.

This example demonstrates that tutors do often provide writers with some information in a directive manner. However, that does not mean the tutor needs to act as a lecturing teacher to do so. The tutor can easily be directive, occasionally, as needed, and still keep the writer actively involved in the session. This is an important point to remember because a tutorial is generally only perceived by both the writer and tutor as successful if the writer receives the information and understanding he or she needs.

A final characteristic that contributes to a tutorial being perceived as successful is how well the writer and tutor establish rapport. Rapport is generally marked by of feeling of camaraderie, or as Terese Thonous argues, a feeling of solidarity between the writer and tutor. The other two characteristics that I just discussed – empowering the writer with understanding and negotiating an agenda – do work to help create some of this rapport. However, in addition to these characteristics, the way body language is used, authority and expertise get negotiated, and how well the tutorial mimics "real" conversation all contribute to the tutor and writer establishing rapport.

Gina Claywell suggests that paying close attention to body language, especially where the tutor and writer sit, can affect rapport. She found that when the tutor and writer sit across from one another a confrontational dynamic can be set up which hinders the tutor's ability to establish rapport. However, if the writer and tutor sit side-by-side, they are more likely to develop a comfortable rapport that is more like a partnership. This partnership, if established, can help the writer and tutor develop a sense of solidarity.

Maintaining this solidarity through the session, according to Thonous, depends on how well the tutor and writer negotiate authority. Specifically, Thonous notes that the tutor needs to decline playing the "surrogate" teacher. That means that the tutor needs to view him or herself as something other than a teacher. A common way to do so, Thonous found, was for the tutor to take on the role of a "reader." Also, the general atmosphere of the tutorial needs to be unlike the atmosphere found in a typical classroom. As one of the writer's in Thonous's study notes, the tutorial was "not unprofessional, but it's less professional [than talking to a teacher], more on a friendship basis." In this case, both the

tutor and writer seem to be suggesting that a collaborative model of the tutorial is preferred by both. The writer's language, "friendship basis," is especially indicative of such a model. However, while the writer and tutor express an initial preference for such a model, some of Thonous's research also suggests that this model cannot be rigidly maintained throughout the tutorial without damaging rapport.

Thonous argues that to retain rapport, the tutor's expertise cannot be openly negotiated. Yet, that is exactly what does happen when the tutor, in this next example, sticks to a non-directive style which is associated with both expressionist and collaborative models of tutoring:

> TC: …how do you want to handle that, as far as the quotation? Since I, since I heard you say, and I'm trying to restate it, but I thought I heard you say that you thought that this quote, this first quote, is not precisely what, what you wanted to say.
>
> SC: No, that's not what I said (laugh).
>
> TC: Then I didn't hear you correctly. Go ahead.
>
> SC: I just, I don't think there's a problem with the quote. Like, that's just what I think.
>
> TC: o.k..
>
> SC: But you know, I'm not the expert, so. I ju-, I just guess I just don't think that I understand why you think that there's a serious problem here.

Here, perhaps the challenge of the tutor's authority could have be avoided if the tutor, before questioning the writer about the quote, made sure the writer understood what a good quote consisted of, even if that meant the tutor used directive discourse to do so. Of

course, the tutor would not want to be so directive that he or she disempowers the writer by writing the paper for the writer, an example I referred earlier. However, some direction, as was described in MacDondald's "informational pattern" of tutor discourse, seems warranted in this case.

In addition to body language and negotiating authority, how well the tutorial resembles "real" conversation can also affect how well rapport is established. That means, according to Thonous, that there should be "average to high rates" of "laughter," "overlaps" (otherwise known as interruptions), "volubility," and "back channels." Achieving these feature requires that the tutorial session not be run like a question and answer session; it must be run naturally with both the writer and tutor feeling free to use a variety of language patterns as the situation warrants.

So far, I have demonstrated that a tutorial is perceived by both the tutor and writer as successful if through the session, the writer is able to get and apply the information he or she needs, the agenda is negotiated and set in a way that meets the writer's expectations, and a sense of rapport is maintained throughout the session. But, how exactly should these characteristics change and impact the way writing center tutors are trained? First, these characteristics should cause writing center tutors and directors to seriously question assumptions regarding collaborative and expressionist models of the "ideal tutorial." An ideal tutorial is simply one that possesses the characteristics already discussed. Such a tutorial may not always be non-directive, expressionist and collaborative. Rather, tutors will need to use a variety of methods to achieve these characteristics.

Secondly, these characteristics should complicate how tutors are trained. Tutors need to be trained so that they understand not only the characteristics that make a tutorial successful, but they will also need training in how to use and analyze a variety of tutoring methods and techniques (both directive and non-directive) to achieve these characteristics. Thirdly, these characteristics will also require that tutors and directors complicate their understanding of the tutor-writer relationship. While that relationship should be a friendly one that is unlike a teacher-student relationship, that relationship may not always function as a peer-peer relationship or a partnership. There will be times in a tutorial where the tutor may momentarily act as a reader with more expertise than the writer. Both tutors and writing center directors should realize that the relationship between tutors and writers is not static. It is a relationship that will need to change and evolve throughout the session so that the writer's needs can be met.

Overall, what this paper has sought to demonstrate is that collaborative and expressionist theoretical assumptions that a successful tutorial is one in which the tutor talks less, avoids directive discourse, and works with the writer to create shared knowledge are not completely supported by empirical research. Rather, this research suggests that the key characteristics that make a tutorial successful are: how well the tutor and writer negotiate an agenda that meets the writer's expectations, whether or not the writer is able to get and apply the information he or she needs, and how well the tutor establishes rapport with the writer. To attain these characteristics, tutors need to use a variety of tutoring strategies, including, when warranted, directive ones. This research also means that tutors and writing center directors will need to complicate what they mean by an "ideal" or "good" tutorial, and they will also have to complicate their

understandings of the tutor-writer relationship. By complicating the act of tutoring in these ways, my paper also reminds all of us that tutoring is a human act, and as such, tutoring can never be neatly or fully grounded in one or two theoretical models. To do so would dangerously oversimplify the tutoring process.

Works Cited

Blau, Susan, John Hall, and Tracy Strauss. "Exploring the Tutor/Client Conversation: A Linguistic Analysis." *The Writing Center Journal* 19 (1998): 19-46.

Claywell, Gina. "Nonverbal Communication and Writing Lab Tutorials." Conference on College Composition and Communication. Cincinnati, OH. March 1992. *ERIC*. ED 345 292.

Gillespie, Paula and Neal Lerner. *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

Harris, Muriel. "Why Writers Need Writing Tutors." *College English* 57 (1995): 27-42.

MacDonald, Ross B. "An Analysis of Verbal Interaction in College Tutorials." *Journal of Developmental Education* 15 (1991): 2-12

Thonous, Terese. "What Makes a Writing Tutorial Successful: An Analysis of Linguistic Variables and Social Context." Talk and Assessment: Ethnographic Research in the Writing Center. Conference on College Composition and Communication. Minneapolis, MN. 13 April 2000.

Walker, Carlyon P. and David Elias. "Writing Conference Talk: Factors Associated with High- and Low-Rated Writing Conferences." *Research in the Teaching of English* 21 (1987): 266-285.